

Portland Fire Media Conference

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Coach Alex Sarama

Vanja Cernivec

Media Conference



JAMIE HUDSON: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Multnomah Athletic club. I'm Jamie Hudson. I'm so honored to be here today. First off, we know the excitement is so high for the return of WNBA basketball to the Rose City, and I would like to announce that the Fire have recently surpassed 15,000 season ticket deposits.

Now with the team just eight months away from the 2026 season tipping off, today marks a very special moment in the Portland basketball community. I would like to acknowledge several people who have joined us here today. Fresh off her announcement as Portland Fire Vice President of Basketball Operations, Strategy, and Innovation, she's coming to us from the Boston Celtics, please help me welcome Ashley Battle.

(Applause.)

We are so excited to have Ashley here in Portland. She's a three-time NCAA champ with the UConn Huskies as well as a former WNBA player. Ashley, welcome to the Rose City.

We also have a 43-year Nike veteran and the Interim Portland Fire President, please help me welcome Clare Hamill.

(Applause.)

I would like to bring up two people, and joining me here on stage first, recently joining the Portland Fire, General Manager Vanja Cernivec, and just announced as the Head Coach of the Portland Fire, please help me welcome Alex Sarama.

(Applause.)

Alex, we're eager to talk with you, but we're also eager to talk with Vanja. First, I want to throw it over to you, Vanja. The floor is yours.

VANJA CERNIVEC: Thank you, Jamie, and thank you everyone for being here at this monumental moment for the Portland Fire as a franchise as well as for our fans.

I think I briefly touched upon during my press conference why I joined this franchise. It's basically because the ownership inspired me with their bold vision for the future together with the values that I passionately identify with.

So we were all aligned in rooting our club in a culture that's all about winning, but also prioritizing the health, well-being, and empowering the athlete.

So it was clear from day one that Alex and Lisa are so passionate about positioning Portland as the epicenter of women's sport, and in order to do that, we knew that we have to have a forward thinking and innovative approach to building this franchise.

So as we lay the foundation for a highly competitive team, we wanted to surround ourselves with people that are willing to go into this direction with us, but are also brave enough and courageous to kind of step away from the ways of things that have always been done.

Our team will be made of people that are willing to grow with us, search for better solutions for good, and will understand that the central piece of everything we're doing is empowering the athletes, building a bulletproof and intelligent athlete that will be able to make decisions in novel situations and ultimately win games for us.

With that framework, we landed on Alex Sarama as our head coach. It has been well documented that Alex is an expert in CLA, but what impressed us the most is his passion to learn, search for new solutions, and ability to change the strategies in accordance to what's missing.

I see Alex as someone that's great at basketball X and Os, but I think he's even greater at coaching the basketball players that then go out and play the basketball. So making them creative and intelligent decision makers.

Most importantly, Alex has a genuine interest in people he



works with, has great communication skills, and he's extremely passionate in breaking down silos within the organization, making sure everybody speaks the same language, and that everybody is contributing their piece of the puzzle.

So we believe that Alex represents the next generation of coaching, and we could not be more excited and proud to have him lead us into the next era of Portland Fire.

JAMIE HUDSON: Thank you, Vanja.

And Alex, welcome back to Portland.

ALEX SARAMA: Thank you, Jamie. It is great to be back. I want to start by saying, what an honor to be the first head coach in this new era of Portland Fire history. Before I start by thanking everyone who made this possible, I want to express just how excited I am to be here.

From the first conversations I had with Vanja, it was apparent just how incredible this opportunity is, and that's because I truly believe we will be creating something unique. Not just within the context of the WNBA, but the professional sports landscape as a whole.

By hiring an entire staff of individuals who are passionate about continuous learning and development, passionate about pushing the boundaries of how things have always been done, and challenging the status quo, we want to benefit from being the first movers in the space to create a winning program right here in Portland.

That's because the vision of the franchise is crystal clear. We'll be going all-in with an evidence-based approach in every single department. So, firstly, I wish to start by thanking Vanja for the trust and the support in this role. It is a huge responsibility which I am not taking lightly, and I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to share a complete sense of alignment between front office and our coaching staff.

I know that Vanja and I view the game through the exact same lens. How we will go about using analytics to make data-informed decisions across the entire organization, to the transformational culture we will create around our players and our staff, and I cannot wait to work with Vanja, Ashley, and the rest of our front office to bring this vision to life.

Secondly, I wish to thank our ownership group. RAJ Sports and Lisa and Alex Bhathal. Their leadership and commitment to this team will put us in a very strong position to succeed. Their investment in women's sports is truly inspirational as well as how they are building the

global epicenter for women's sports right here in Portland.

I cannot wait to work with Lisa, Alex, and the rest of the RAJ Sports team. I also believe that the collaboration with the Portland Thorns is a very unique element to this. The ability to share best practice ideas and work together in a one-of-a-kind practice facility will give us a huge advantage as we look to streamline the development of our players and recruit free agents to Portland.

I would now like to transition towards thanking the Cleveland Cavaliers' organization. I am incredibly grateful to Koby, Mike, and Kenny for being able to pursue this opportunity. It is their leadership and innovation which makes Cleveland such a special place to work, and now as other NBA teams begin to experiment with evidence-based ideas, I believe they deserve a lot of credit for being the first movers in this space.

On the topic of Cleveland, I wish to thank our incredible players as well as the entire coaching staff and support staff who I have loved working with since day one.

I would also like to take a few moments to thank in particular Coach Kenny Atkinson. Kenny has had a huge inspiration on how I coach and will continue to do so as I transition into this new role with the Fire.

How Kenny openly embraces analytics, uses motor learning theories in practices and player development to believing in a unified model with every department working together in close sync. This will be a huge inspiration as to how I go about things with the Fire.

I would now like to thank my family, which starts with my fiancée, Georgia, as well as my parents and my sister back home in the U.K. I am ever grateful for your unwavering support. I would also like to thank a few of the individuals who have had such an influence on my career, beginning with Coach Will Weaver who gave me my first professional opportunity in professional basketball with Paris, and Will is all in on these ideas and everything I'll be talking about today.

As well as Sergi Oliva, assistant GM of the Trail Blazers who is here to support. Sergi was an integral part of me spending the year with Rip City, and I'm grateful for you for being here, and a lot of the conversations we've had will be a big inspiration for things at the Fire.

I would also like to thank Mike MacKay, director at Canada basketball for many years who has been my most influential coaching mentor.

Finally, I wish to thank the fans and the community of



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Portland. Truly I cannot tell you how motivated I am to bring this vision to life. Portland is an incredible city, and it deserves an incredible WNBA team. Myself and my entire staff will be working tirelessly to create a product on the floor that you will be proud to support.

Thank you very much.

JAMIE HUDSON: Thank you, Alex. Now, before we get to the open media Q&A, I have a few more questions for both Alex and Vanja.

Vanja, I want to start with you. Will you share more on the interview process and why exactly Alex is the right fit for the Fire?

VANJA CERNIVEC: Thank you, Jamie. We were very intentional in conducting a wide and rigorous search. We had a criteria on the human side and on the basketball side.

So on the human side it was very important for us that we bring someone in that will be able to develop and grow with the organization, someone that will come in very humble and not think they have all the answers.

As an expansion team, right now we operate in the environment where we have more questions than answers. Therefore, a coach that is comfortable operating in the unknown and just taking the steps in the dark, not knowing what the future brings.

On the basketball side, we were looking for someone that brings an evidence-based approach to coaching, innovating coaching, someone that puts the athlete in the center of what they do, and someone that's very passionate in bringing down the silos.

We see so many silos in different sporting organizations between the departments, so we were intentional of bringing someone in that will do the opposite, that will empower everyone on the staff to chip in a piece of the puzzle.

Yeah, Alex fit all those criteria and even more. We were very excited to bring Alex in just because of his history of learning and exploring the evidence-based idea approach and especially his passion and genuine interest in people he works with.

He pays attention. He takes time to get to know people, to get to know your history. He would call it his forms of lives. Like I mentioned before, bringing down the silos and looking for competitive advantage in every department, including mental performance and strength and condition

and physical performance in athletes.

JAMIE HUDSON: I should say welcome back to Portland, Alex. For you, what is your vision for the Fire as you step into this role?

ALEX SARAMA: Ultimately I want to lay the foundation for winning a championship, and I want to focus on two areas in response to this question. Number one is the culture and the environment I'm going to create around the team, and I really believe in this idea of transformational leadership.

I think often at the professional level culture is a bit of a buzz word that's very vague, and we're going to focus on the tangible values and behaviors every day that allows us to create an environment of psychological safety. And that's not just for the players, but very importantly, for the staff.

Because if we want to be on the cutting edge of innovation and having the staff come with brilliant ideas every single day, then it needs to be a psychologically safe environment. I want this to be one of the best places to work in professional sports.

So this environment of joy is very important.

And the second part is the basketball and my vision for how we will actually play. I'll be utilizing a principles-of-play approach to offense and defense. I think I want to prepare the team for where basketball is going and the future of how I think the game is going to be played, and that means incorporating trends which are emerging in global basketball. Whether it's the men's and women's Euro League, B1 in Japan, NBL in Australia, or the WNBA and the NBA, I want to really embrace all these unique ideas and create a style of play that is unique to the Fire.

JAMIE HUDSON: Alex, you mentioned innovation, and we know that that is something that the RAJ ownership group has talked a lot about, and we continue to see decisions made that are rooted in innovation. Alex, Vanja also mentioned this, but can you talk more about this evidence-based approach to coaching and then how that impacts players?

ALEX SARAMA: Absolutely. I first discovered a completely different way of coaching eight years ago, and I remember being blown away, because in one week I changed my complete perception of the game and how I coach.

And this approach, the constraints that approach, CLA, it's so exciting because not only are we going to be applying



this on the court, but in every single department. Vanja alluded to that.

In the weight room, how we incorporate analytics, how we use film in the theater, and the ability to have everyone on the exact same page is so exciting. We're actually going to be creating some roles and some titles which we've never seen before in professional basketball, some hybrid roles that I think it's so exciting, because we will truly be able to fulfill this unified model.

So I think it's very exciting to have this methodology grounded in research, and we know it works. You know, we've seen multiple sports embracing this, and it's where the game is going.

JAMIE HUDSON: That is so exciting about the future of the game, Alex.

Now, you are coming to the W for the first time, albeit you were here with the Rip City Remix, and of course several years of experience with the NBA. But Alex, for you, what excites you about this role now in the WNBA?

ALEX SARAMA: So, firstly, I believe this is the most exciting period in WNBA history, and the chance to coach with and collaborate with the best athletes in the world, that is a remarkable opportunity.

I think from watching W games, it really aligns with my vision for how we will play: the emphasis on shared ball and player movement, creating advantages through two- and three-person actions. I'm just very excited to create a vision of basketball that will be a perfect fit for the Portland Fire.

JAMIE HUDSON: Vanja, now you have two top basketball operations personnel in place with both Alex and Ashley. What's next for your team?

VANJA CERNIVEC: Yeah, Ashley and Alex are just two pieces of the puzzle. When you want to innovate in an organization, one person can never do it. It has to be the whole team.

So we're going to continue to build a diverse group of people and staff across entire team that will work under the same methodology. That's our goal number one.

We are also starting to focus to identify players that will fit our organizational kind of vision, strategy, and the way Alex wants to play, and are patiently waiting for the answers about rules on the expansion draft and what the new CBA will bring.

The ultimate goal here is to create an environment that the new generations and current generation of athletes will want to come play and play in Portland.

JAMIE HUDSON: Thank you both. With that, we will open it up to media questions.

Q. Vanja, I want to talk specifically to you. The hiring of a head coach was highly anticipated, and I think a bit surprising for folks in Portland and across the league for a variety of reasons, some of which you mentioned just about having coached in the W or the lack thereof and just being the epicenter of women's sports.

I'm very curious about how the hire of Alex in specifically the epicenter of women's sports shows the vision of the Fire's dedication to women and women's sports?

VANJA CERNIVEC: Like I mentioned before, we carried out a vigorous and wide search for the head coach, and one of the main pillars of RAJ Sports is innovation, and that was rooted throughout our interview process that I mentioned the criteria we had.

At the end, Alex was the one candidate that fit that vision and the values the best. That's why he's sitting here today.

Q. For Coach, how important is creating a good player-to-coach relationship, and what goes into both creating and maintaining that with both young and veteran players?

ALEX SARAMA: I love that question. For me it starts with complete transparency with the players and having frequent and very regular conversations. I'm a huge believer that the best environments are player-led and providing opportunities for autonomy.

So that will even involve -- some of the principles of play we create will involve conversations with the athletes. How we approach practice, how we warm up.

I really believe that starting with transformational leadership and providing opportunities for autonomy will put us in a really strong position to have great relationships with our athletes.

Q. Alex, point of clarification, were you in Detroit last night? Did you come from Detroit to here and back to Boston?

ALEX SARAMA: I flew straight from Cleveland, so I did miss the game.



Q. And then understanding you're going to operate in dual roles here for the foreseeable future for the time being, can you talk through kind of how you anticipate being able to juggle those multiple responsibilities while still working with the Cavs and help build out the vision here?

ALEX SARAMA: Absolutely. Well, the best thing is I will be here in Portland for all the key dates in the Portland Fire history and upcoming expansion draft, free agency, et cetera.

So I will be here, and I won't be missing any of the most important dates while both organizations still figure out the exact details over the transition.

Q. A lot of your background is in player development. What is going to be the difference between you being a player development coach and what's different about you as a head coach?

ALEX SARAMA: I'm actually so glad this question came up, because I've never seen myself as a player development coach, and I honestly think it's a great example of the silos which exist in basketball and how we categorize people in different boxes, because for me player development -- every coach does player development.

If you want to do player development well, then you have to know the Xs and Os side of basketball. You have to know principles of play, analytics.

I think the days of player development just being an on-court thing, it's passed out because the strength coach, the physio, they're just as important as what we do on court. So my whole career I've been very, very intentional about the principles of play, how we actually approach offense and defense, and player development is just one of several different buckets that I believe goes into being an effective coach.

Q. How do you envision your first season as a success? What's your measuring stick for you for that?

ALEX SARAMA: Great question. We will be having specific KPIs, and my vision is to create one of the leading analytics programs in the WNBA. So being able to set some very specific KPIs to actually monitor the improvement of our players.

A huge one for me and the whole organization is player health, and I think that's one of the reasons we're going all-in with this evidence-based approach. I really want to make sure we are developing adaptable, resilient athletes,

and hopefully that will lead to a reduction in injuries, and I think having a healthier roster is a key part of it.

Then the culture, another key piece. Of course, yes, we want to win, but I want to make sure that it is a transformational culture and that genuinely every single player and staff involved for the Portland Fire when we conclude the season, it's nothing but the best experience for them.

Those will be some of the benchmarks we'll be using to determine success after our first season.

Q. In your opening remarks you alluded to creating new roles that had never existed in professional women's sports before. Can you give us any more details?

ALEX SARAMA: So I don't want to reveal the exact specifics of our competitive advantage, but I can say that the lines will be blurred. So we won't have, for instance, a strength coach who only works in the weight room or does the warmup and then disappears for the rest of the practice.

So a lot of the roles will feature these very interesting hybrids where staff will be involved in multiple departments doing multiple things.

Q. You announced that there was 15,000 preseason tickets already sold. Fans are obviously excited, but what can fans expect to see at their first game?

ALEX SARAMA: Absolutely. So extremely intentional principles of play, and I think a lot of these will depend on the players that we have on the roster, because I really believe that I don't want to come in with a very rigid philosophy that may not fit the strengths or weaknesses of the group of players we have. So that will impact.

One of the best advantages of a principles of play approach is it's so flexible, but I think there are a few kind of key features of any team I coach, and I think that is it starts with relentlessly seeking out the most efficient shots and our shot quality will be a big piece of it offensively, as well as our conceptual style.

So I want to have very intentional triggers, spacings, and coverage solutions within our offense. Then defensively I really believe the game is going towards maximum disruption. As opposed to just staying with base coverages and very predictable defensive schemes, I want to think how can we disrupt as much as possible through using some surprise coverages, through using a KYP type defense where players become very attuned to who they

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are guarding. I think that will be one of the most exciting parts of this. It will be a style of play that will be different to the rest of the W.

Q. Coach, I'm curious, you were talking about your style of play. I know we're a long way from there, but what kind of players are you going to be looking for to fit your mold, to fit your coaching style? It can be questions to both of you.

VANJA CERNIVEC: Definitely good human beings, good teammates. That's always -- whatever any organization I touch, that's always a part of my recruitment on the coaching staff and on the players.

Then we're going to look for versatile players that can move between the positions, very high basketball IQ. Probably players that are able to shoot, stretch the floor, and just hard-working players that will want to be coached hard, want to get better.

So that's kind of my vision. Alex, feel free to chip in.

ALEX SARAMA: I'll just build on that, Vanja. I think recruiting players who can make the most of the unique environment we will have. I think creating -- we want to create the best player development environment in the W, so I think having players who will be able to grow with us and be open-minded to this approach, but I think it will be a mixture of really promising young players and then some veterans through the locker room. But no, just be really exciting because I think player development, it's not just for the young players. It's for everyone on the entire roster.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the one year you spent in Portland. What made you want to come back to this city?

ALEX SARAMA: Portland is a great city, and I think what I remember here are the fans are so passionate about basketball, and I really think that will make the difference.

I mean, we heard it with the deposits on the season tickets. I think to be able to play in that type of atmosphere is amazing. I also think Portland is a city -- I think there's no better city in the U.S. which epitomizes values that we believe in at the Fire.

So great city. Towards the end of my tenure at the Remix I started to explore a lot more. I won't be confined just to staying in Tualatin this time. I want to get out and make the most of what Portland has to offer.

Q. What values are those?

ALEX SARAMA: For me values-wise, when I look at Portland, I think there's no better city that epitomizes things like social, equality, and racial justice. I really think at the Fire it's perfect, because it aligns with us completely as an organization.

Q. For Vanja, you have an ex-player as your second in command and Alex with his expertise as well. How does it feel to kind of see your vision coming to fruition?

VANJA CERNIVEC: Oh, it's a dream come true, and we're just getting started. I'm just very energized and humbled and I guess proud to be in this position to be able to have a blank slate and build in accordance to your beliefs and previous experiences.

Similar to Alex, my vision has changed as well. Probably four or five years ago I stumbled upon evidence-based approaches, mostly through movement and rehabbing my body. That's why I started diving into, what is this? Why are people talking about this? There's a popular saying, you know, "Once you see it, you can't unsee it."

I've been waiting for this opportunity and people that would kind of be open to innovate and do things differently, and here I am.

I'm so grateful to the RAJ and the Bhathal family and our whole ownership group, that it's willing to kind of trust us and jump into these unknown waters with us. Yeah, and very proud to work with Alex again.

JAMIE HUDSON: With that, that concludes today's press conference. Thank you both so much, Vanja and Alex. Thank you all for attending today's introductory press conference. We look forward to seeing you as the Fire tip off in 2026.

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